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Fences and Profanations: Questioning the Sacredness of Urban Design

Abstract

Adopting an impure and contingent conception of urban design as a biopolitical apparatus, along the theme of urban informal squatter-occupied spatialities, this paper searches for an alternative narrative of urban design. It presents a theoretical and analytical framework developed around Michel Foucault's and Giorgio Agamben's spatial ontology and political aesthetics as an aggregate source toward recalibrating the approach to urban design research, pedagogy and practice, integrating the debate around the *dispositif* and its profanation. Critically engaging with the complexity and contradictions of the current neoliberal urban design practice – articulated as a complex urban apparatus instrumental to regimes of security and control – the paper explores the conceptual tool of profanation as a potential antidote to the sacred production of the neoliberal city.

The act of profaning the urban realm, of 'returning it to the free use of men', is approached through the lenses of a design research initiative in a squatter-occupied space in Rome. The narrative that emerges from this theoretically inspired action research is pointing to an alternative practice that can be read as a site of resistance in reclaiming the intellectual productivity of urban design theory and research.

Keywords: Agamben, Urban Design, Profanation, Rome, squatter-occupation, design research

1. The *Sacredness* of Urban Design.

The promotional video of CamKo City (2009), a new satellite city being built on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, has surprisingly a lot in common with the initial scene of *Independence Day* (Devlin & Emmerich, 1996): a huge alien starship is gravitating respectively above the rural landscape of Cambodia and an American suburb. In both videos, it represents a new civilisation arriving from the sky, with a shade of technological perfection and a supernatural *aura* that feeds on the ancient past and wisdom of disappeared cultures. While Wagnerian music plays, CamKo City flies above Khmer ruins and the narrator evokes a “mystical Khmer culture, the legacy of Angkor Wat” (CamKo City, 2009: 0’05”), and states that the myth will become the new history (*ibid.*). New shining towers and glass pyramids have appeared from nothing to symbolise “the new civic pride of Cambodia” (*ibid.*, 0’40”). The video well represents an allegorical but scaring manifestation of an urban design artefact as quasi-supernatural phenomenon: and the truth is — paraphrasing Shakespeare — somehow stranger than fiction as confirmed in the increasing production of satellite cities, where these are nothing more than *augmented* gated communities, *fenced* developments mushrooming around the urban world, doubling (at least in the initial intentions) the size of many cities they moored at, as alien starships coming from a differential reality, supernatural and sacred, mindful of the arrogant zenital authority described by Boeri (2004).

CamKo City’s *overman*-ly narrative does not come as a surprise when framed in the current debate (see amongst others: Banerjee, 2011; Cuthbert, 2011; Gunder, 2011) whereby Urban Design appears celebrated, but also relegated, in a role of commodifying instrument of the urban transformation – able to produce quick revenues for developers through the delivery of *sacred* (and fenced) products for *perfect* inhabitants. The article stems from intersecting this debate with a parallel one, where instead an alternative narrative of Urban Design is being written, one that contests the mainstream (supernatural and over-imposed) attitude, and pushes, rather, toward the re-appropriation of a communitarian and humanistic nature of the urban – from the resurgence of activism and social engagement in architecture and design to a reconfiguration of architecture’s ethical shift, from the revitalisation of participatory neologisms to the discussion on the expansion of the role of architect (from the development of new spaces of engagements across many creative disciplines to the reflection on the social role of design (Fuad-Luke, 2009; DiSalvo, 2010; Aquilino 2011; Cupers, 2013).

Acknowledging these two only apparently opposite debates, the article wants to look precisely at the alien and at the same time sacred nature of the current mainstream practice of urban

design – at its being removed from the free use of most citizens, at its products lying often beyond a *fence*, separated from the city — and, conversely, at its *profanation*, the act that can return urban design and its spaces to the disposal of the urban whole, opening up its fences and effacing their separation. The fence is seen here in its archetypical gesture, as a tool for enclosing spaces, and in its historical role as prominent signifier of the material condition of urbanism: in order to subvert such mechanisms at the level of both practices and discourses, the notion of profanation is suggested as potential to subvert such control and open up other emancipative possibilities. Borrowing the term from Giorgio Agamben (2007, 2009a), *profanation* is an act that can return a ‘sacred’ object to the free use of mankind, after being taken away and ‘separated’, from it. Applying the idea of profanation to the realm of urban design and the spaces it produces, it would mean to return the practice itself to the everyday users of those spaces, and to discard the neoliberal ‘fenced’ logic, which lately has created ‘alien’ environments such as CamKo city.

Understanding urban design as an unclear, not neutral, and not fixed discipline but more as a discursive practice, a mongrel one (Carmona, 2014) with a sheer range of discipline, theories and methodologies, practices and problematic, the paper wishes to contribute, provocatively, suggesting and documenting an alternative mode of practice informed and stimulated by the prescription of ‘profanation’ as a way of reclaiming a critical and ethical project of the epistemologies, the methodologies and the pedagogies of urban design.

Acknowledging the limitations of the remit of the paper around the debate of the discipline and the practice of urban design, the present wants also to inform design research with an Agambenian reflection that is political, provocative and language oriented. However, recognising that Agamben’s production has been highly influential on recent urban and spatial debates (mainly through his popular *Homo Sacer* – Agamben, 1998) this paper strives to concentrate on profanation as a lesser-known incisive concept, which can offer a reinvigorated political possibility of the design act. It considers Agamben’s theoretical apparatus as relevant for urban design research: profanation fits into the overall Agambenian work in seeking to deactivate the apparatuses of powers in the interest of a coming community which is only latent, present but perhaps unrealised; and involves a resistance that challenges the contemporary place of language – specifically design language “whose hypertrophy and expropriation define the politics of the spectacular-democratic society in which we live” (Agamben, 2000:X). The centrality of profanation is therefore seen not simply as a productive etymological antidote to the quasi super-natural augmented phenomenon of urban design, but as a site of resistance in reclaiming the intellectual productivity of urban design theory and practice.

In the first part of the paper we describe urban design as a part of a wider governmental mechanism of the city, adopting as conceptual register the notion of *dispositif*, introduced earlier by Michel Foucault (1980) and then re-elaborated by Giorgio Agamben (2007, 2009a) later. We look at how the *dispositif* itself works, and how urban design plays in its machinery. In the second half of the article, we will look at the conditions of possibilities for inverting such a mechanism, discussing examples from practice in which designers and/or users of space have managed to find room to start writing an alternative narrative of urban design.

2. Expanding the design discipline: the emergence of a critical practice

The paper builds on and further enriches the existing body of work developed around the relevance of Agamben's philosophy¹ on space (Boano & Floris, 2005; Pløger, 2008; Boano, 2011; Boano and Martén, 2012), while insisting more on the profanation as a theoretical construct that can lead to investigating the full potential of a contestation toward the mainstream production of urban space and to meet the completely different agenda that today's urban requires. It does so pushing the reflection on the role of the practitioner overcoming consensus-driven logics and the blind faith in the 'expert' knowledge, while embracing more just, equitable and shared forms of spatial and political co-existence and of production of space and knowledge within the urban realm.

Many have contributed to the momentum gained by such debate, to the point of calling the attention of the international mainstream – it is in enough to think of the volumes and relative websites and exhibits “Design for the Other 90%” (Smith, 2007), “Small Scale, Big Change” (Lepik, 2010), “Spatial Agency” (Awan, Schneider & Till, 2011) – on architects and practitioners who are seeking to transcend conventional disciplinary concerns and to face more directly the deep problems of our contemporary built environment. It would be enough to think of some acclaimed projects by Urban Think Tank or Estudio Teddy Cruz, just to cite the more mediatised, to see how an effort toward a shift in Urban Design and Architecture's discipline and practice has been done in the last decade: their projects focus on usually forgotten geographies – peripheral land, informal settlements, border areas – and tend to discard the usual modes of production and the relationship designer-client, they empower new actors and favour the creation of new alliances between those (Brillembourg & Klumpner,

¹ For a more detailed introduction see: de la Durantaye (2009), Murray (2010), Watkin (2010) and Murray and Whyte (2011).

2010a, 2010b; Cruz, 2002, 2011). They, in different degrees of criticality, contribute to a redefinition of the design practice shift closer to the users, in an attempt to claim back an agency of design that goes beyond the spatial transformation – and toward, rather, the recalibration of the power relations between the actors and the contestation of the mainstream production of space and knowledge over their environment. In short, they offer a renewed engagement with the complexity of the context they work in.

Only in the last years, a multiplicity of publications has further reinvigorated the debate on a critical and participatory design practice in contested spaces (amongst many: Archer et al., 2012; Avermaete, 2010; Blundell Jones, Petrescu & Till, 2005; Boano, Garcia Lamarca & Hunter, 2011; Boano & Kelling, 2013; D'Anjou, 2011; Dovey, 2013; Gamez and Rogers, 2008; Luansang, Boonmahathanakorn & Domingo-Price, 2012; Lister & Nemeskeri, 2010; Mosley & Sara, 2013; Noero, 2011; Petcou & Petrescu, 2007). Perhaps though, it has been exactly the Spatial Agency project (Awan, Schneider & Till, 2011) to put forward a more systematic approach to highlight usually overlooked design actions, in this way giving a more thorough picture of that 'other 90%': on the book we find not only design firms but also initiatives undertaken by Urban Social Movements, artist collectives, worker co-operatives, community associations, governmental and non-governmental organisations. And clearly pointing out once for all, how their motivations are not capital driven, but rather spring out of their ethical stance or political beliefs, of ecological reasons, of a pedagogical approach, or simply of professional challenges² (*ibid.*).

It is not our intention though, to put forward an easy metaphorical dichotomy between a sacred (or sacralised) urban design and a supposedly profane one³: the pair once distinguished those

² On the website spatialagency.net, alternative spatial practices are grouped answering to three main questions: *how* (appropriating, disseminating, empowering, networking, subverting); *where* (the site of a group's action: creation of knowledge, organisational structures, physical relations, social structures); and precisely *why*, the motivations behind a group's action.

³ The adoption of a sacred tenet of Urban design, read through the work of Giorgio Agamben, does allow us to more deeply reflect on the dichotomy sacred and profane and on the one of the hierophany (manifestation of something else) described by Mircea Eliade. "Sacred or religious," writes Agamben, "are those things that belonged in one fashion or another to the gods" (2007, 83). For this reason, "they were removed from the free usage [al libero uso] and commerce of mankind, and could not be sold, given as deposit, or ceded in usufruct" (2007, 83). To profane was thus to return the things that had become subject to a state of sacred exception—things that had been consecrated — to their original context. From the above we can easily see that Agamben's conception of the relation of sacred to profane is a desacralised one. In his account, there is nothing inherently sacred in sacred things, just as there is nothing inherently contaminated in profane ones. They are, for him, categories like others, buttressed by those whose interest was to hold to such distinctions. As such we are less interested in a rigid definition of urban design as sacred in a 'hierophanic' sense but more aligning with Agamben's goal to free things from the "sacred names" that set them apart as the province of the few; it is to return the things of the world to their natural context, to 'common usage'.

allowed inside the temple (the sacred) and those kept from it (the profane).⁴ To profane, in this sense, means to open up what was previously enclosed: we aim to align with Agamben's goal of freeing things from the 'sacred names' that set them apart as benefit of the few, to return them to their 'free' or 'common usage'. This makes clear that the 'usage' in question is not simply one with a more ample or liberal legal definition, but one that categorically rejects the idea of legitimate ownership: this 'lawless usage' is not a purely anarchic one, but it is one that rejects the paradigms offered by the juridical culture of its days and carries the revolutionary implication that 'lawful usage'⁵ was far from just (de la Durantaye, 2008).

'Lawful usage', for urban design and architecture disciplines, has always meant to set up a series of gestures and tools aimed to enclose, protect or hide something that was sacred (often the space itself), removing and separating it from the direct availability of use from the everyday man — from the Cromlech of Stonehenge to the Temple of Karnak in Egypt. Today's practice is still producing sacred fences, displaced from the domain and control of the users of urban space, whose lives as well seem to be overwhelmed and saturated by the sacred character of the fence they will inhabit: almost classic heroes, healthy and fitted, as we can see in the boards hanged on the fences of the construction of the new upper-middle class developments and in their promotional brochures and websites⁶ (see again: CamKo City, 2009; but also, respectively for examples from London, Dubai, Miami, Manila; see: Fizzy Living, 2013, Dubai Culture Village, 2013, Resorts World Miami, 2013; DMCI, 2013).

3. 'Gating' Spaces and the Government of the Urban Realm

These realities though – the *privatopia* described by Banerjee (2011) – are nothing else than the wealthy side of a wider tendency of the current urbanisms to 'gate': the counterparts of the wealthy developments, their leftovers, are slums, blighted neighbourhoods or, extremely, camps whose degree of openness is as well very low and where the 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2005) most clearly manifests. A look at the current debate on urbanism and urban studies (Banerjee, 2011; Graham, 2011; Boano & Martén, 2012) tells us of a contemporary city often described as a collection of gated environments, a multitude of fences with different thicknesses and degrees of permeability, visibility, and porosity. Urban Design and

⁴ However as a cautionary note, sacred and profane should not be read as positively attached to an upper class and a more popular, vernacular or bottom up dichotomy where the capitalist upper class enclaves can be seen as "profane" and the spaces of democratic movement as "sacred".

⁵ Once ascribed to the statements of Church and State.

⁶ These images populate construction site hoarding too, haunting the public domain (Duman, 2010) with homogeneous portraits of a safe, healthy and wealthy life. A future life, predesigned (Duman, 2013), and celebrated even before coming into being.

Architecture have always been producing fences — temples, agoras, arenas, mausoleums — all environments and artefacts employing several mechanisms of filter between an *outside* and an *inside*, with the latter inevitably acquiring a character of *otherness*, albeit in a state of potential connection with what surrounds it. For us here, fences are treated beyond their materiality and dimensional parameters, and elaborated as complex objects made of discourses, technologies, narratives of their actors, norms and codes, behaviours and regulatory statements.

The work of Giorgio Agamben outlines a spatial approach to interrogate urban territories, landscapes and spaces (Boano & Martén, 2012; Giaccaria & Minca, 2011; Pløger, 2008). Agamben (2005) makes the paradoxical assertion that today the state of exception is the rule when elaborating a theoretical template for the existence of a realm of human activity not subject to the rule of law: with time, the realm of lawlessness has become spatialised through the figure of the *camp*, highlighting the inherent spatial qualities bred from exception (Diken & Bagge Laustsen, 2005; Ek, 2006). We could think of the description done by Soja (2000) of Los Angeles and its ‘carceral archipelago’, of Petti’s (2007) account of the West Bank and its enclave of exclusion, or look at São Paulo (Angelil, 2013), Istanbul (Kormaz & Ünlü-Yücesoy, 2008), and the list could go on. At the core of such urbanisms – either defined as *military* (Graham, 2011), or *splintering* (Graham & Marvin, 1995; 2001), or *planetary* (Brenner, 2014) – lies the mechanism of fencing itself, working as “a reminder of how spatial typologies and social tensions contribute to shape an urbanism of exception” (Boano & Martén, 2012:3).⁷

In order to position the relevance on Agamben’s potent theoretical contribution, though, there is the need to first remark how that contribution itself has sprung out from an ongoing interpretation of the thought of Michel Foucault (Bussolini, 2010). Beyond the well known connection around biopolitics and governmentality, and around secularisation and secularism (Cinar & Vender, 2007; Legg, 2007; Magnusson, 2011; Walters, 2012), for us very important is rather both philosophers’ reflection on the possibility of exerting a continuing influence through the inertia – in spite of important and pronounced ‘breaks’ and transformations – of political institutions and practices: ‘paradigms’, in both thinkers, indicate all the procedures and all the effects of understanding / awareness that a specific field is disposed to accept at a certain time, and therefore the locus where to find the most productive link between Foucault and Agamben. “Thus these are contingent relations, subject to continual change and perpetual inventiveness over time, but which produce tangible material effects – in the forms

⁷ In the case of Boano & Martén (2012) the authors refer to the wall between Israel and Occupied Territories, which rises as paradigm of urban fencing mechanisms.

of subjectivation and in terms of specific modes of construction (of buildings, etc.) and treatment (of people, environment, etc.)” (Agamben, 2009b:11-12). As such, stemming from this methodological enquiry, Foucault favours “an analysis of concrete dispositif through which power penetrates the bodies of subjects, and governs their forms of life” (Agamben, 2009b:14).

For us then urban fences as dispositif of seclusion are “shap[ing] a vaster problematic context that they also constitute and render intelligible” (Agamben, 2009b:19). The camp can be assumed as the paradigm par excellence of such urbanisms founded on the gesture of *gating* and aimed to control and govern the urban environment. Such gesture corresponds, in its most archetypal version, to confine a subject (or a multitude of subjects) in a fence with a ‘door’ to guarantee access and control. And whether the confinement could happen for necessity of either punishment (as in the case of condemned people) or protection (as in the case of sacred or forbidden spaces), the outcome will be, in both cases a spatiality that develops to a certain extent as other, different and separate, secluded and even juxtaposed from what surrounds it. The potential and relevance of profanations of such marginal and overly politicised environments, we will see below, should be looked at along with the Agambenian philosophical research that aims to unlock and deactivate mechanisms and apparatuses of power.

4. The Heterotopic Character of the Fenced Type

Foucault’s argument that modern biopolitics does not simply replace, but rather complements techniques of sovereignty and discipline, suggests that biopolitics is always already multiscalar, since it operates both as a production of the collective body of the population, as well as a production of individual disciplined bodies. However, Foucault’s outline of spaces that exist ‘outside all places’ but still related to them, giving them the capacity to suspend, neutralize, mirror etc. is presented as a phenomenon that can question the dominant logic of spaces, and challenge the status quo. They are the actualisations, materialisations, of the virtual realm of utopian notions and at the same time spaces of potential resistance, of *otherness*. It is here that the camp paradigm interestingly overlaps to the heterotopia’s concept (Foucault, 2008).

Foucault (2008) defined heterotopias, or *other spaces*, as the “kind of places that are outside all places, even though they are actually localisable” (*ibid.*,17) and maintain connections between them, which happen at all different scales though relying upon mechanisms of *filtering*. Among the six principles adopted by Foucault to elucidate the vague notion of

heterotopias, one indeed reads “heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and make them penetrable” (*ibid.*,21). In other words they allow the passage of someone or something in particular, at given times or through specific rituals. Cities are impregnated with such rituals and made of many heterotopic urbanisms – highly connected spaces at the centre of flows of capital, knowledge and people but nonetheless becoming *sacralised*, and being day-by-day penetrable by fewer people in fewer occasions. The contemporary practice of Urban Design contributes to such condition producing environments that need to be branded as both controllable – safe, repaired from the dangers of urban life – and sacred, because their exclusiveness makes them more appealing on the market, as well as safety does.

The over-regulation of bodies-and-spaces and spaces-with-bodies happens as in the Foucaultian Jesuit colony, where “existence [was] regulated in all of its points” (Foucault, 2008:22), while at the same time “human perfection was effectively accomplished” (*ibid.*). Rules and codes are introduced, spatial mechanisms are put in place, mechanisms of surveillance guarantee that no ‘other’ will get into such typology of ‘other’ spaces. A typology that is actually made of a series of ready-to-be-used types: gated communities, shopping malls, entertainment complexes, hotels, luxury housing and office towers, – clearly generating from what Harvey (1989) had identified as the capitalistic hegemony over urban space. According to Grahame Shane (2012), types and typological urbanisms emerge from a flow of energy and pressure, engineered by particular urban actors at specific times to deal with particular situations, i.e. to facilitate the government of the urban realm. They certainly lever on the concept of heterotopia – though hardening its fences and content, making it inflexible, impenetrable and governed through principles of exclusion and control: they never reach, but definitely look at, the extreme condition in which the heterotopic type becomes camp. In becoming types they turn into the identifiable *norm* which “offers designers the advantage of a speedy response and a standardised product” (Grahame Shane, 2012:128) being at the same time uncontrollable and non-modifiable by the users – heterotopias whose *use* has been displaced toward a higher level, *sacralised*.

Where to find contemporary examples of such semantic and typological shift that can complement the original historical images given by Foucault? London’s Spitalfields Market is certainly exemplary: from a place where the activity of ethnic minorities was carving out religious spaces from the post-industrial fabric of the area, to its transformation after 1989, when the Spitafields Development Group redevelop the former market with a large-scale mixed-property commercial development project (Heyns, 2008). Turned in a highly contested space where activists’ visions were clashing against the developers’ ones, Spitafields became

London's exciting new financial quarter, where Foster architect's buildings "displaced and hardened the boundary between the City and Spitalfields [itself]" (*ibid.*, 235), conquering new spaces for financial capital and transforming a popular market into an exclusive attraction. The former market site has become a sacred plot, fenced because displaced toward a higher level, which makes its spaces and goods inaccessible to a multitude of people.

Campo Boario in Rome represents another heterotopic urban condition. Originally emerged as a fence for breeding animals then destined to the adjacent slaughterhouse, it got further *heteropianised* after its complete abandonment in the late 70s. At that time Kurds, Palestinian, Gypsies, Roman activists and a group of *cavallari*⁸ squatted either its borders or its courtyard the archetype of the Foucaultian Persian Garden – "a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world" (Foucault, 2008:19). Under many pressures of transformations and speculations, authorities, investors and developers have been more recently transforming the site, into a citadel for arts and alternative economies, symbolising a renewed and reclaimed space of social interaction and multiculturalism not without consequences on the mythical and symbolical core of the original 'garden' – resulting in eviction of both Roma and Palestinians and to partially weaken the activity of the cultural centre (linked to the antagonist Left) run by Italian activists. In Agamben's words, both the old Spitafields areas and the squatter-occupied Campo Boario could represent two examples of coming community (Agamben, 1993a) *in nuce*, emerging from highly heterotopic spaces though later normalised through the 'application' of a type.

5. Urban Design as a 'Dispositif'

Criticisms and conflicts around urban design's tensions between a proclaimed social mission and dogmatic formalisms are well known in the literature (Sorkin, 2009). However it is through the application of types, then, that Urban Design becomes a tool for the separation of spaces from the rest of the city and for their consecration to the use of people whose behaviours, income, social status are deemed as complying with certain codes, under the umbrella of slogans on 'quality of life' and 'sense of place'. Urban Design though is only one of the many discursive practices that contribute to the "Janus face" (Swyngedouw, 2005:1991) of the governance arrangements that have solidified over the last two decades and that "have created new institutions and empowered new actors, while disempowering others" (*ibid.*).

⁸ *Cavallari* is the term used in Roman dialect to name the drivers of touristic chariots (*botticelle* in Italian). The group is traditionally described as politically close to right-wing positions, and hostile to the other groups populating Campo Boario.

Back to Foucault, discursive practices and governance arrangements are considered to be an aggregate of physical, social and normative infrastructure – amongst which Urban Design – put into place to deal strategically with a particular problem: Foucault himself terms this aggregate *dispositif*, a theoretical model that in Agamben's writing becomes the main target of an act of profanation and that we deem as very powerful for our argument. The *dispositif* concept indeed not only does explain the current governmental condition of the urban: rather, in its very essence, it already contains the germs to overcome its governmental power, allowing room for obsolescence, profanation and flight (Legg, 2011).⁹ We could think again of Phnom Penh, where this obsolescence manifests clearly when the mechanism 'misfires', and some areas of the city become victim of the miscalculations of the investors, of the abuses of powers by the authorities, of the encroachment of many actors over one single urban space. Continuous landfills to 'create' land out of lakes and marshlands, with consequent eviction of many communities and consequent disruption of their livelihoods, have been changing the landscape of the city in the last ten years (Lindstrom, 2013), though rarely achieving the wanted massive development (the CamKo City project itself got stuck after a fraud scandal and is proceeding very slowly – Hul, 2013). Apart from financial issues, the situation of lull occurred in many cases also because of (and to a certain extent thanks to) the rise of the attention of the international community, which has joined the local voices in the protests against the violation of human and housing rights. In the case of Boeng Kak (Schneider, 2011), a silent fence is now surrounding a post-atomic landscape of sand. Investors have disappeared after the World Bank interrupted the loans following massive protests. Communities in the surroundings are still resisting and (backed by many NGOs) have taken advantage of the *imperfection* of the strategic plans of authorities and investors.

It is this "essentially strategic" (Foucault, 1980:194) nature to be of interest for us in the original Foucault definition of *dispositif*, which reads: "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions" (*ibid.*). Agamben (2009a) traces back this definition referring to what is enforced, obligatory: *dispositifs* – as fences – are then read as mechanisms of entrapment: "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings"

⁹ Speaking of flight and other emancipatory possibilities, Legg bases his essay on an interesting parallel between the *dispositif* itself and the *assemblage* as theorised by Deleuze (2007). Deleuze himself (1992) as Agamben (2009a), had written his "What is a dispositive?" trying to give an interpretation to the rather seminal statement formulated by Foucault. Legg (2011) notices, ironically though respectfully, that Deleuze's dispositive looks almost comically assemblage-like.

(Agamben, 2009a:14). A fence is ultimately an elementary and truly spatial form of *dispositif*, which Agamben indicates as ultimately, biopower.

As Agamben notes drawing on Walter Benjamin's essay *Capitalism as Religion* (2005) and Debord's (1992) *The Society of the Spectacle*, it is exactly capitalism, through the sphere of consumption, to realise "the pure form of separation" (2007:81) and to provoke estrangement: fences, as emplacements and (emplaced) types, embody an estrangement from the *dispositif* that is typical of the "single, multiform, ceaseless process of separation that assails every thing, every place, every human activity in order to divide it from itself" (*ibid.*). In the separation of exchange-value from use-value the commodity turns into an inaccessible fetish, and, in Debord's (1992) words, in the spectacle the real world is transformed into images. Urban Design – in its being a commodifying machine and at the same time object of commodification – become the perfect product of neoliberalism that "effectively mirrors its values of reification and façade, the superficial, the surface, in the commodification of the built environment" (Gunder, 2011:186) – creating what Carmona (2009) calls fetishising of Design.¹⁰ Such fetish, is truly evident in the spectacularisation of some parts of Borough of Newham due to the 2012 Olympics and of the legacy of such event (Carmona, 2012; Fraser, 2012; Hatherley, 2012; Hill, 2012; Tomlinson, 2012), with issues of gentrification, risk of eviction for many of the original residents and also disconnection of the Olympic park itself from the surrounding fabric. In the case of the Olympics, resembled estranged environments, disconnected by the rest of the city but nevertheless part of the wider *dispositif* that has been transforming the whole Eastern fringe of London in the last decade in a sacred urban environment voted at the *religio* of capitalism.

6. Towards a 'Profanation' of Urban Design

In order to erase such estrangement, Agamben suggests the possibility of an act of profanation, as the possibility of new uses for urban environments trapped in the capture of the *dispositif*. In "*In Praise of Profanation*" (2007), he defined the gesture of *profanation* as one that can return to the free use of mankind what had been previously taken away from it,

¹⁰ For Debord (1992), fundamental reference for Agamben, fetishisation translates into an immense accumulation of Spectacles, statement that Agamben definitely paraphrases when writing "it would probably not be wrong to define the extreme phase of capitalist development as a massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses [*dispositifs*]" (2009:14). If "Spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images", then are these images to produce, ultimately, the illusion of the sacred (*ibid.*). Urban Design partakes in the creation of such an illusion and becomes sacred itself, contributing to a spectacularisation that is nothing else than the consequence of the extreme accumulation of the capital it serves (*ibid.*) and, as seen, of a wider strategy of government of the city.

confined to the inaccessible sphere of the *sacred*. He suggests that “one day humanity will play with the law as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good” (2005:64). Drawing on the work of Emile Benveniste, Agamben emphasises the close connection between the play and the sacred, a connection where “everything pertaining to play once pertained to the realm of the sacred” (Agamben, 1993b:70).¹¹ Playing with these practices of ceremonies and rituals, turning them into games, allows a new and free use that is no longer tied to their origins in the sacred sphere.

Therefore the sacred becomes target to acts of profanation, a negligence toward the *religio* of its norms, “an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of [it]: namely, play” (Agamben, 2007:75). Agamben reconstructs the etymology of the term *religio*, suggesting it does not derive from *religare* (the binding together of the human and the divine) but, rather, from *relegere*, a verb that “indicates the stance of scrupulousness and attention that must be adopted in relations with the gods, the uneasy hesitation (the rereading [*rileg- gere*]) before norms – and formulae – that must be observed in order to respect the separation between the sacred and the profane” (*ibid.*:75). Hence, adopting Agamben’s etymology in the correct manner, ‘*religion*’, in the first instance, refers to “that which removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere. Not only is there not religion without separation, but every separation contains or preserves within itself a genuinely religious core” (Agamben, 2007:74).

However, the shift from the profane to the sacred - the sacrifice¹² - is not simply mono-directional: virtually any object can be made sacred and, conversely, profane – as every dispositif contains the theoretical possibility for emancipation. Nonetheless, separation and sacrifice could re-emerge, for even in Profanation the sacred core remains intact: “Profanation separates the two spheres of rite and myth, respectively “drop[ping] the myth and preserv[ing] the rite” (Agamben, 2007:75) or “effac[ing] the rite and allow[ing] the myth to survive” (*ibid.*:76), and in this way always ‘respecting’ the original sacred character. To better understand this point we can return to the example of Campo Boario. An intervention, made by Stalker (2005) along with the Kurdish community, materialises and translates into a series of acts of play in

¹¹ Such is the case, for instance, of many games, which originally derive from religious ceremonies, rituals, and practices: ball games come from myths associated with the gods fighting for possession of the sun, games of chance bear the marks of oracular practices, the chessboard was once an instrument of divination, and so on.

¹² In the religious context, the paradigmatic shift from the profane to the sacred is, precisely, sacrifice, an act that removes the victim from the profane sphere – in other words giving the victim over to the realm of the divine. For Agamben (2007), sacrifice represents separation in its pure form, and in this sense it can be understood as an apparatus that founds and maintains the division between the sacred and the profane – in our case the fence that marks an emplacement.

what Agamben presents as profanation. Stalker played with the sacred nature of such space, with an act of bodily performance inside the fence of Campo Boario. Understanding the sacred character of the obstructed former animal-breeding ground, the community was involved in a series of games to provoke the potential emancipation of the space. Stalker performed collective playful activities such as making a flying carpet, growing a garden, setting up a collective lunch, and creating alternative borders which empowered the community without undermining the nature of the space. Such “plays” produced a differential place.

7. Making Rooms for New Uses and Politics

According to Agamben (2007), play occurs in the form of either wordplay (*iocus*) or physical play (*ludus*). A fundamental difference between the two is represented by the time dimension, which, respectively: decreases to zero, in the case of the physical play, being it an event, a ludic ritual that is enacted to open up a space; or grows toward infinite, in the case of the wordplay, to write (or re-write) a timeless myth. This is visible again in Stalker’s work, which elaborates a tension between the *ludic* action of enacting rites and the almost archaeological endeavour in finding the community’s past, in writing its myth, and to open it up to a new use: to profane an environment without erasing its ‘sacred’ core, hence, the designer will have to be able to read the ‘religious’ norms of a fence, and to ‘empty’ part of it (its rites, or its myths) to *make room* for new uses to come.

This *making room* “neutralises what it profanes [...] deactivat[ing] the apparatuses of power and return[ing] to common use¹³ the spaces that power had seized” (Agamben, 2007:77). The deactivation of devices of power, in the interest of a *coming community* (Agamben, 1993a), that is present but still unrealised emerges clearly at the centre of Agamben’s philosophy. Profanation, is a *gesture* that Agamben comes to define via an alternative reading of the two sides of Aristotle’s famous distinction between action (*praxis*) and production (*poiesis*) in which gesture is neither a production nor an enactment but is “undertaking and supporting [...] breaking the false alternative between means and ends” (Agamben, 2000:155). Positioning profanation as an architectural and design gesture, we want to stress it as the display of mediation, the making visible of means as such and their potentiality of making something other-than-themselves. It is both action toward and production of a coming community, not only the ultimate ends of the gesture, but also, inevitably its means, what we

¹³ As Whyte (2010) notices the possibility of profanation translates into, precisely, rescuing a use, that is “neither natural nor utilitarian” (Whyte, 2010:6), yet to be discovered:¹³ a use that was lost during the chronological time but nevertheless becomes ‘available’ in the messianic one.

have to work on to make it finally happen, to imagine new uses of space and its objects, and to eventually unlock new modes of politics (Colebrook, 2008).

This tension toward new modes of politics highlights the centrality of the work of art (and, for us as an expansion, design) as the supreme means to achieve new forms of life that do not belong to the existing order. In this sense design should acquire the messianic role of instrumentally finding cracks in the narrative of the *dispositif*. As such profaning the narrative of the *dispositif* means opening up its fences, by playing with the content and uses for which they were precisely meant to enclose, protect or hide. Play is the fundamental component of an Urban Design that is finally given back to the citizens, that accounts for aspirations and needs of everyday life, that utilises individual and collective memories to rethink their environment and tackles its issues, that involves its citizens in the process of design and empowers them to be their own drivers of change in the future.

In this light, profanation as play can be related to the semantic displacements of the Situationist *détournements* (Debord & Wolman, 1956), in their displacing often insignificant or overlooked elements of a discourse toward a different context – and in this way shifting the focus on those, giving a totally different meaning to that context itself. Or to the Deleuzian notion of *bricolage* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984) – whereby the schizophrenic producer relentlessly recomposes already present elements to give rise to a totally different ensemble. We have already mentioned Teddy Cruz's activity, and thinking of a project such as *Living Rooms At The Border* (Cruz, 2002; 2011) we could definitely speak of *détournement*, *bricolage*, and profanation as negligence (and play): the architect worked along with the non-profit organisation Casa Familiar (which partially funded the project) to lobby institutions and planners for changes in the planning regulations. In this way new relationships (new rites) between urban actors begin a new mode of politics, leading to the performance (Cruz, 2002) of a new world – the enactment of the myth of a new life on the building block. This becomes a highly flexible entity that could accommodate, beyond affordable housing units (with a percentage of shared space and services), community centres, public corridors and spaces and, most significantly, a few empty structures: vacant frames, 'open' to changing uses – informal commercial activities, shared facilities, temporary markets, more or less permanent dwellings for newcomers. The aaa collective (atelier d'architecture autogeree) experience in 56 rue Saint-Blaise in Paris discussed in Schneider (2013) is another current example of alternative spatial practices that potentially contests the sacred *dispositif* of the urban environment – making of an interstitial space (and of its borders, especially) the means for achieving an interaction and a collaboration between different urban actors. The following section will briefly elaborate on a short design research workshop, undertaken by the authors

in a squatter-occupied space in Rome – an attempt of profanation that goes exactly in the direction of reshuffling power relations in a given situation.¹⁴ The following section will briefly elaborate on a short design research workshop, undertaken by the authors in a squatter-occupied space in Rome – an attempt of profanation that goes exactly in the direction of reshuffling power relations in a given situation.¹⁵

8. A squatter-occupied spaces as a profaned one

In September 2012, we worked with the squatter-occupation community of Porto Fluviale,¹⁶ along with Laboratorio Arti Civiche, which had already established a long-term relationship and collaboration with the community. The workshop has intersected the long-term experience of Laboratorio Arti Civiche¹⁷ in squatter-occupied spaces in Rome with the one of the DPU summerLab,¹⁸ a design platform working through short workshops where the participants are stimulated to reflect on a renewed role of the designer and on the possibility of designing for a more ‘just’ city. For three years in a row the DPU summerLab wanted to confront the reality of the so-called ‘occupation city’, and the possibility of working an entire week at Porto Fluviale was a great opportunity to experiment ‘profanation’ in an environment that – sprung out of a profaning act (the appropriation and restitution to a collectivity of a building) – was already questioning the possibility of opening up its ‘fence’. In spite of the constant risk of eviction, the community had recently voted to keep the main gate open during the day to let people from the surrounding area feel free to enter. The process started a couple of years ago through opening a tearoom on the ground floor (our main working space during

¹⁴ Operations as the one previously mentioned are profanations which manage to *play* separating the two spheres of rite and myth, respectively “drop[ping] the myth and preserv[ing] the rite” (Agamben, 2007:75) – when they overcome (or, rather, harness) struggles between actors and manage to re-enact a forgotten rite of community collaboration – or “effac[ing] the rite and allow[ing] the myth to survive” (*ibid.*:76) – when they collect and bring back to life the memories of a community to re-write its mythology. As we saw, the sacred core is ‘hit’, but not destroyed. Rather, it is put to another use: communities are not undermined by the design intervention, but properly ‘read’ and then ‘involved’ in the intervention itself, becoming the first actors of a transformation that in this way will be able to go on in the longer term.

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¹⁶ Porto Fluviale belongs to the galaxy of squatter-occupations in Rome, a network – led by three main social movements¹⁶ – that from the early 90s onwards has grown and transformed, not only in its nature but also in its objectives. Nowadays there are about fifty squatter-occupations in all of Rome (LAC, 2013), whose size varies from a few households to a couple of hundreds.

¹⁷ See: www.articiviche.net

¹⁸ See: <http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/programmes/summerlab>

the workshop), and continued with the transformation of many spaces that were once residential and have now become an assembly room, a bicycle workshop, not-for-profit guest rooms and new rooms for skill-sharing activities. Our task was to understand the actual possibility to open up permanently this environment, and how.

We saw how critical practice and new forms of design has often found their rationale and a fertile ground in liminal or leftover spaces (we saw the cases of *aaa* and *Stalker*), on border conditions (we saw *Teddy Cruz*), in contested spaces, or in heterotopic ones. They all take place in previously abandoned buildings, private or public – whereby, we could say, the obsolescing urban dispositif and the stalled pressures for mainstream development leave more room for attempting to profane the mainstream itself. They are heterotopic spatialities (Foucault, 2008): separated from the rest of the city but at the same time connected to a multitude of other spaces; *mirroring* the outside reality, being comprehensive of many realities and geographies; being *heterocronies* (*ibid.*), more open, for instance when hosting events, or more closed, when an external threat is approaching (typically, a risk of eviction according to the particular political climate). In such leftover pieces of urban fabric, Social Movements have been able to become the designers of their own everyday life and space, and to move the latter back to a neglected *common* use, achievement typical of profaning operation: we argue then the design action done by the Social Movements is already a profanation in itself, in its representing a form of negligence toward the mainstream production of space and knowledge¹⁹ in the city. Negligence that is manifested appropriating and reshaping an urban fabric originally meant for other purposes and users – reinventing common uses, introducing new ways of doing politics within the squatter-occupied spaces.

Building on all the above we undertook a series of action-design-oriented interventions with the ten participants, the members of Laboratorio Arti Civiche and the inhabitants of Porto themselves. We started with the current state of affairs, with the current modes of productions of spaces and their narratives aiming to understand the places as site of engagement. Knowledge was co-produced by all participants collecting and combining the stories and

¹⁹ The focus of the struggle has recently moved from housing to *dwelling*, expanding its breadth from the simple provision of housing units for people in need, to one that provides comprehensive services to the whole *urbe*. Such a strategic move towards the city – grounded in the ethical stance of the Social Movements – aims to make the occupations more visible and possibly accepted across the territory, trying to fill the void left by the disappearance of the welfare state. Through the creation of, for example, open desks for womens' advocacy assistance and support, homeless and others in need open the squatted spaces to the city through the organised intersection of general services, leisure and cultural activities.

myths of the inhabitants: only through this narrative excavation we understood how the 'occupation' had actually begun about 10 years before and how many transformations had occurred since the day when 80 families of different nationalities – mainly Italians, Ecuadorians, Moroccans and Peruvians, supported by the movement's activists – broke into the former barrack, Porto Fluviale, whose name evocatively means *river harbor*.²⁰ In the act of re-writing a history of the present, It was interesting to see how collective and individual memories overlapped each other blurring. The process of re-writing a mythology of Porto Fluviale (to achieve a profanation as *locus*) had to navigate amongst many different truths. By interactions, exchanges and reflections with the community we understood how for most of its first ten years of existence, Porto Fluviale had to keep its gates closed: a discursive practice of closure and separation that serves to confront and resist the housing policies and mainstream urban development of the area and the city as a whole. In the meantime, the restitution of its building to a communal use – its profanation – had occurred. Porto's three floors were re-used with residential purposes, building houses facing both internal and external sides of the C-shaped building. The dark corridors still marked by the rails once used to move the materials to the service-lifts serves as distributive system to all housing units which, search for light vertically, thanks to the widespread use of self-made mezzanines built to reach the level of the old barrack's arch-shaped windows –whose base is at 2.50 meters – providing a view toward the outside or the courtyard. The courtyard and entire ground floor evolved from simply being a space for parking cars surrounded by residential units, to become the centre of the community life and collective uses.

²⁰ Porto Fluviale is named after the road (via del Porto Fluviale) on which its main gate opens, while the road's name derives from the nearby harbor on the river Tiber where once were the customs. Through the years this toponym ended up recalling the squatter-occupation's character of open port where many identities were able to moor at.



Figure 1. Fluviale, the outside. *Source:* All images are DPU summerLab 2012.



Figure 2. Fluviale, the courtyard.



Figure 3. Fluviale, the open gate on the final day of the workshop.



Figure 4. Fluviale, the tea room.



Figure 5. Fluviale, the assembly.

9. Profaning the fence: enacting new modes of politics

We were invited to participate in an assembly during which, finally, we were able to properly understand the inhabitants' radical shared vision. Becoming part of this collectivity, the participants and us profoundly questioned our role as 'designers' – we would say that only

through this act of proximity and 'invited' participation, we really reclaimed a different place of engagement. In the assembly, a person from the squat's leadership stated that the new square would have set aside capitalist ideals, contesting the realm of consumption (the *unprofanable* one according to Agamben) and becoming a place where to experiment new activities and ways to exchange, where to give again priority to the use-value over the exchange one. Despite these aspirations – and of the initial act of profanation occurred through the building's occupation itself – the idea of a truly open and post-capitalistic space seems yet-to-be-realised, and rather acting as another mechanism of filter: not everybody would necessarily feel welcomed to become involved – people with different political stances could feel or be opposed, or even pedestrians might refrain from entering, maybe simply because of the depth of the entrance passage, a true spatial threshold toward a rather unknown space. On the other hand, Porto's inhabitants' needs of both privacy and security may inevitably emerge as internal contradictions: the vision they share certainly does not come from a consensual process, and dissent remains – a few families hold a more conservative position, though still respectful of the assembly's final decision. The concerns of some were simply in keeping the gate closed for the safety of the children. For others, the priority was in leaving the main gate open while building three new ones on the main staircases – transformation that would replicate the 'privatised' image of many piazzas that Porto Fluviale aims to contest. Some did not want to open at all, since "the outside has never been that friendly to us" (DPU summerLab, 2012).

In spite of these disagreements, and somehow welcoming them, the workshop aimed to portray ways to keep the space truly open while hinging upon (and to a certain extent, flushing out) conflicting priorities. All the ideas, scenarios and options were eventually presented in a final event that enacted the rite of opening the space, inviting all Porto's inhabitants as well as those of the surrounding area to share a meal while listening to the proposals. Other smaller rites were enacted by students, inhabitants and visitors, simulating how the space could look, using plans to share ideas for the transformation of the *piazza*, devising menus of what a potential 'visitor' could have expect to find upon entering the space. And showing new possible future 'worlds': from setting up a 'monumental' community garden to activate the leftover portions of the courtyard, and make this new greenery visible from the train passing by, to using the corridors between the gates and the courtyard in a flexible way, as space for projection, for sports, for relaxation, for 'looking at the outside' or for getting in contact with the outside itself, installing small activities on it, to declaring the inter-cultural richness of the

inside on the façade toward the road.²¹ In the final hours of the event, a collective meal on the square took place in a rite of sharing ideas, foods, cultures and languages. A new mode of politics genuinely took place, where the power relations between the inhabitants were recalibrated and everybody had gained, at least within that short timeframe, a capacity of speech.

10. The Mythology of the Squatted Fence: Archaeology as Profanation

If the ‘instantaneous’ event was important to spark a movement toward *opening up* the fence, the challenge for a designer or practitioner is to understand how to extend indefinitely such a temporary condition, working on the possibility for such space to be theoretically open and inclusive at any time: the idea of *profanation* as *iocus* can help understanding a way forward. Porto Fluviale was treated as an archive, acting archaeologically to dig into its layers, to (re)write its stories and unpack the shifts in power relations influencing its spatial transformation and its re-significations. This *iocus* was not simply aiming at understanding the past to forecast possible futures, but at the same time was a *statement of centrality* (Lefebvre, 1972, 1995) for Porto and its daily realities, its possible germs of Agamben’s *coming community*²² – a true design act.

Such an archaeological approach reinforces the intersection between Agamben (2009b) and Foucault (2002). Foucault exalts archaeology against history as it can ‘centralise’ and ‘monumentalise’ what has been left over as marginal, because of not obeying widespread norms of conduct, and in so doing, it can profane those norms themselves. History, on the contrary, creating and entailing a set of official discourses, de facto partakes in the exercise of the homogenising action over the urban realm deployed by the *dispositif*: it feeds the appearance of spectacular environments, defining their myth, sacralising their images, celebrating their events, hardening their fences. Archaeology is what allows us to profane History and the *dispositif*.

Central for us in Porto Fluviale was using an archeological approach to re-write a mythology of the place: listening, elaborating, diagramming and representing the life and the housing stories of the inhabitants – first collectively and then individually – and constructing an understanding of how the spatial and social relations have changed during the almost ten

²¹ This idea was actually realised a few months later, getting in touch with the famous artist Blu, who drew a mural on the façade (Blu, 2013).

²² Perhaps the main inspiration for such methodology comes from Robert Smithson’s (1997) *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, where the artist describes a portion of apparently wasted suburban land as *monumental*.

years of occupation. We started from the very first profaning act, the breaking into the emptied structure of the building: in that moment, the grand narrative of an urban development that was feeding on its own leftovers was directly challenged by the occupiers. Also, the act of occupying managed to re-symbolise instantaneously a space that had been used for a long time as an army barrack: a radical left (and pacifist) Movement, through an illegal act, had appropriated a piece of the grand History not only of an area or of a city, but of a State itself.

The inhabitants showed us some pictures of how the space looked like while getting into it, after years of abandonment, and told how the space was transformed from the moment they broke into it. The recombinant analysis of the emergent narratives, overlapping with conflictive aspirations, was then represented and collaged in a stop-motion movie showing all the mutation the ground-floor plan had undergone in the last 10 years, how the place was conquered, shared, transformed, enclosed and then, on the day of the projection, opened up through an event. Along with this, the participants wrote up a set of 'life-stories' cards, building on the narratives collected in many individual and group talks with the inhabitants. The cards later served as a representation of identity, designed towards both inhabitants and potential visitors (a provisional 'exhibition' space was set up at the courtyard's entrance). Such gesture portrayed heroically their collective and individual emancipations from a housing emergency, their personal acts of profanation toward a reality that would otherwise exclude them. Moreover, it portrayed the inhabitants' hopes around a future piazza as a catalyser for their dreams and aspirations. Y. and H.²³, for instance, tell us of the inability to survive in Rome with children without a family support: "This is why we live in the family of Porto Fluviale, although this condition carries along with it many discriminations; we often have to conceal this" (DPU summerLab, 2012:22). Or P., who explains how she moved away from Ecuador because of an economic crisis, and how she established her new roots in Porto Fluviale, to the extent that she is saving money so her parents can join her (ibid.). Another, R., acknowledges the big challenges the project of the piazza will carry but sees it as a necessary step to overcome the prejudices against them, and as an opportunity to build a public space that would be quite unique in the Roman context. And finally, I., who is now happy in her small flat with her two dogs and simple dreams of a piazza with more space for sport activities, and in general, more 'green'.

Inhabitants and participants had different reactions to the adopted design approach. The former feeling happy about being involved in the process and seeing themselves legitimated as the actual agent of change over their space; and the latter initially contesting it because of

²³ We introduced anonymity in referring to Porto's inhabitants official names, using simply a capital letter.

its being essentially retrospective, but then appreciating its potential to look differently at the past to envision possible shared future situations. Whatever idea was produced in six days, ultimately, our presence *in* the space became the first form of *profanation* against a sacralised practice of urban design and toward a reinvented, recalibrated, one. And the coming community of Porto, present but still unrealised (Agamben, 1993a), was enacted throughout the whole week, when the space had become open to the external – although maybe not to *whatever being* (*ibid.*) – and conflictive power relations within the community had been reshuffled with the aim of listening to everybody's voice.

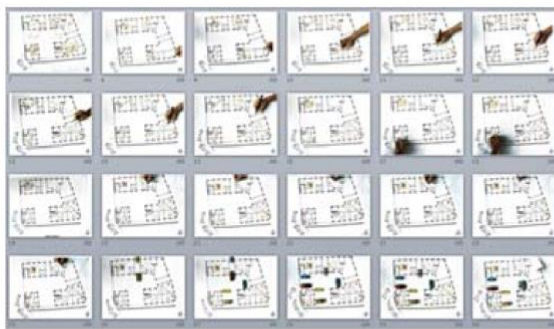


Figure 6. Fluviale, frames from the stop-motion movie on the history of the courtyard.



Figure 7. Fluviale, a moment from the workshop: discussing possibilities with the inhabitants.

11. Conclusion: Reconfiguring Urban Design as a Profaning Act

Investigating and suggesting a contemporary urban production around key devices and dispositifs that instigates a regime of truth as a global ‘divide and rule’ mechanism – or as Merrifield recently called a neo-Haussmanisation (Merrifield 2014) – reveal the nature of orthodox urban design as part of hegemonic practices complicit in perpetuating professional logic of dispossession, exclusion and territorial control. In this context, Agamben’s philosophy helps not only discovering such urban discursive formations and identifying their moments of operativity, but is used also as a mechanism to subvert the sacred tenets of urban design as a discipline.

Profanations has been elaborated as a powerful intellectual framework and therefore design gesture able to deactivate the apparatuses of power which the urban governmental dispositif has put in place, unlocking its *fenced* situations and polarised spatialities, working on a ‘change of use’ – a use that is different from the one the capital had ‘assigned’ to that particular piece of urban fabric. Far from being a normative call, the profanation of the sacredness of

urban design variegated theory and praxis is put forward suggesting an alternative practice of urban design inspired with the theoretical project of Giorgio Agamben and a design research that is embodied in the everyday uses and spaces carved out in the production of urban fenced spaces.

The foundational causes of the contemporary 'gated' urban landscape are derived not only by the 'neoliberal' side of the dispositif described and visible as profit oriented, predatory speculations and accumulations by dispossessions, but rather by the continuous, subtle, discursive, culturally entrenched and overwhelming exercise of power that *all* actors of the urban transformation perform in order to guarantee themselves access and control over certain spaces of the city. In our attempt to render visible and intelligible such overwhelming dominance, we find, amongst its root causes, far more than the quest for profit, but rather gender, racial and ethnic discrimination, contrasting political and religious ideologies, drug trafficking, the obsession for security just to recall some (Dikeç, 2006; Soja, 2000). The attitude of the urban to 'gate' therefore depends on much more than neoliberalism, and profanation must target far more than capitalism and neoliberal urbanism, but rather all the apparatuses of power that these underlie. Profanation should then help to both navigate alternative urban practices and research, as well as to discovery potential greater narrative for the discipline and the pedagogy of urban design.

In our interaction with the community of Porto Fluviale contradictions still remain, and the actions we undertook – although building on the momentum the community had toward turning their courtyard into a public piazza – could not manage to profane the whole 'thickness' of a fence whose layers had accumulated during almost ten years of occupation: the action of opening up, from both sides, the squatter-occupation and the city, will still take long, and while we write we know it is still an on going process. Profanation, we have seen, is about 'rescuing a use', and it is this act, the one that manages to open up a particular space, to make it become, even for a short moment, an open signifier. The act of opening up corresponds to unlocking new modes of politics and everyday practices – able to resist the *givenness* of the place, what designates "either some form of social fixity (for example an identity imposed upon an individual or group) or material orderings of space, or even established ways of thinking that draw limits between the possible and the impossible" (Dikeç, 2012:674). Politics disrupts the previous order, is negligent against it, opens up new spaces, or rather inaugurates space.

Our research around Profanation as *gesture*, shows that the profanation per se neither *produces* nor *enacts* space, but rather breaks the false alternative between means and ends (Agamben, 2000). Through profanation, as a design act able to open up space and make

visible new modes of politics, not only is the political subject enabled to retain her/his political condition, *conditio sine qua non*, to claim her/his possibility to have agency in urban transformation, but is also moved toward a centre closer to an 'equality' with other subjects that otherwise could only be supposed, enacted. Not only does she/he retain the capacity of speech, but she/he is put in the condition to exercise such capacity, not to fall into *bare life* (Agamben, 1998).

In repositioning and questioning urban design practice and research as a gesture of profanation not only do we wish to offer a critical reading of Agamben's possible adoption into such disciplinary realm, but also to refuse a sole *aesthetics of praxis* (as production) complicit with the unequal status quo: we want to move toward a more active, generative and embedded practice able to contest its productive relations. And we want to insist on the necessity of an *aesthetics of poiesis* (as action, art as production of origin – Agamben, 1999) where space and relations are produced and rediscovered through profanations, and thus brought back to the use of man and his ability to construct politics.

Although we elaborated the urban potentials of Agamben's work in an alternative and theoretically informed practice, a disciplinary shift \does require more empirical and theoretical efforts, not only on the dehumanising aspect of the architectural dispositif – including the ban and exception – but also on the multiplicity of strategies that can contest them. The research approach, applied to practice, can be seen as mobile and tactical as it does allow to analyse and then synthesise – or deconstruct and recalibrate – urban design as a contextual, responsive, and ultimately empowering practice that is not about the 'destruction' of the dispositifs of exception, but rather about rendering them inoperative by liberating that which has been separated from them.

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